



Overview of the 2016 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community

BEGIN READING



Each year in a series of Congressional hearings, the Director of National Intelligence testifies on the US Intelligence Community's assessment of worldwide threats. On February 9, 2016, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper provided this year's first [unclassified testimony](#) to the Senate Armed Services Committee where he described the current state of intelligence and national security issues facing the United States.

Director Clapper began his [opening statement](#) with a characterization of global trends in which “unpredictable instability” has become the “new normal.” He went on to highlight the geographic dispersal of violent extremism, regional political instability and the growing refugee crisis particularly in Europe. In addition, the IC's assessment points to environmental challenges such as climate change, technological innovation resulting in growing cyber threats, and increasingly assertive adversaries as contributing factors to the erosion of global stability.

Taken together with the DNI's oral and written statements, this resource—organized by both regional and subject area insights—provides an overview of the IC's Worldwide Threat Assessment for 2016.

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CYBER AND TECHNOLOGY

From Artificial Intelligence to Internet of Things, technology and concepts that were once thought impossible are on track to play a role in our daily lives. This means opportunities—in health sciences, education, and everyday convenience—as well as threats from those who want to manipulate these advances for their own goals. Artificial Intelligence systems are used to enable more rapid trading in stock markets around the world, yet cyber-attacks against these systems could prove devastating to the global economy. The Internet of Things could help monitor an aging family member, but could also be used to identify, surveil, and target unknowing individuals. As these advances progress, countries will seek new ways to control and exploit the resulting information, and many counties are considering new rules to censor data, decrease anonymity, and confine data within national borders.

Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea are the leading cyber threat actors. Russia has shown its willingness to target critical infrastructure systems and conduct espionage operations even when detected. China continues to have success in cyber espionage against US companies, the US government, and



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CYBER AND TECHNOLOGY

our allies. Whether its cyber commitment of last September moderates its economic espionage remains to be seen. Iran used cyber espionage, propaganda, and attacks in 2015 to support its security priorities, influence events, and counter threats—including against US allies in the Middle East. North Korea probably remains willing and able to launch cyberattacks to support its political objectives. Terrorists continue to use the Internet to organize, recruit, spread propaganda, and collect intelligence. ISIL specifically displays unprecedented online proficiency among extremists. And cybercriminals remain the most pervasive cyber threat to the US financial sector. They use cyber to conduct theft, extortion, and other criminal activities.



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TERRORISM

Sunni violent extremism now has more groups, members, and safe havens than at any other time in history. A modest but persistent number of these extremists will continually plot against US targets overseas, and a smaller number will attempt attacks on the US homeland. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is able to direct and inspire attacks against a wide range of enemies around the world. It has become the preeminent global terrorist threat, with estimated strength exceeding that of al-Qa’ida, and has attempted or conducted scores of attacks outside of Syria and Iraq in the past 15 months. It has benefited from thousands of foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria since 2012. These foreign fighters could—and, as seen in the November 2015 attacks in Paris, did—return home with skills, technological savvy, and connections to plan and execute attacks.

ISIL, however, is not alone: other Sunni terrorist groups, like al-Qa’ida and its affiliates, still retain the capability to attract recruits, resources, and launch operations. Despite counterterrorism pressure that has significantly degraded the “core” leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qa’ida



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TERRORISM

affiliates are positioned to make gains in 2016. Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Nusrah Front—the al-Qa’ida affiliate in Syria—are the two most capable al-Qai’da affiliates. The increasing use by violent extremists of encrypted and secure Internet- and mobile-based technologies enables terrorist actors to “go dark” and serves to undercut intelligence and law enforcement efforts.

Shia violent extremists will deepen sectarian tensions in response to threats from Sunni extremists and to advance Iranian influence. Iran—the foremost sponsor of terrorism—continues to exert its influence in the Middle East through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Qods Force, Lebanese Hizballah, and proxy groups.



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WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION
AND PROLIFERATION

In the past year, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) have been tested or used by both states and Sunni violent extremists. North Korea conducted a nuclear test on January 6, 2016, and while they claimed it was a “hydrogen bomb,” we do not believe it was a successful test of a thermonuclear weapon. North Korea has expanded the size and sophistication of its ballistic missile forces and is committed to combining a nuclear payload and a delivery system—one that is capable of posing a direct threat to the United States. It also conducted a satellite launch of February 6th and subsequently claimed that the satellite was successfully placed in orbit. In terms of chemical weapons, the Syrian Regime has used chlorine on the opposition multiple times in 2014 and 2015. Sulfur mustard was used by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the summer of 2015—the first time an extremist group has produced and used a chemical warfare agent in an attack since Aum Shinrikyo used sarin in Japan in 1995. We are continuing to track numerous other allegations chemical attacks in Iraq and Syria.

States are continuing or advancing their WMD programs, sometimes in violation of international agreements to which



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WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION
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they are a member. In spite of its joining the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013, Syria has not declared all the elements of its chemical weapons program. Russia, which has the largest and most capable foreign nuclear-armed ballistic missile force, has developed a cruise missile that is in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. And China’s People’s Liberation Army also continues to modernize its nuclear missile force, with the goal of ensuring the viability of its strategic deterrent by providing a second-strike capability.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreed to by Iran provides greater transparency into its nuclear program, and increases the timeline it would need to produce enough weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear weapon from a few months to about a year. We do not know whether Iran—which also possesses the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East—will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons. Should it decide to build a weapon, Iran does not face any insurmountable technical barriers, making its political will the central issue.



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SPACE AND COUNTERSPACE

It has never been easier for governments and the private sector to participate in space, with nearly half the countries in the world involved in space activities. China and Russia stand out for their space activities, each continuing to improve the capabilities of their military and intelligence satellites and the sophistication of their operations. For example, Russian military officials publicly tout their use of overhead imagery satellites to support military operations in Syria.

As these advances take place, not only are the growing capabilities of other countries of concern, but also the threats they pose—known as counterspace—to our own systems. China and Russia continue to develop weapons to deny, degrade, or disrupt US military, civil and commercial space systems. They understand how our military fights and how heavily we rely on space. For example, China has made progress on its anti-satellite missile system that it tested in July 2014, and Russia is developing laser weapons designed to blind US intelligence and ballistic missile defense satellites. The Russian Duma officially recommended that Russia resume research and development of an airborne anti-satellite missile;



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SPACE AND COUNTERSPACE

referring to the system the Duma's Defense Committee Chairman noted, "we will create systems that will be able to intercept absolutely everything that flies from space."



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COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

Russia and China are actively seeking to penetrate the US Government’s national decision making and intelligence apparatus. Other countries, including Iran and Cuba, continue to view the United States as a primary threat.

More than just targeting the US Government, many foreign intelligence services target national security and proprietary information from US companies and research institutions involved with defense, energy, finance, and dual-use technology.

Non-state actors—including international terrorist groups and transnational organized crime organizations—are also actively targeting the US Government, and their human, cyber, and technical capabilities are improving. Like the intelligence services of foreign governments, these non-state actors recruit human sources and conduct physical and technical surveillance to facilitate their activities and avoid detection and capture.

As we have been reminded in recent years, the insider threat—namely, those who disclose sensitive US Government information without authorization—is also a real one. It is exacerbated by the sophistication and availability of technology that can be used to target information technology systems.



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TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

Transnational drug trafficking is a growing threat to the United States at home and to US security interests abroad. Mexican drug trafficking groups have mastered production of the white heroin preferred in eastern US cities and have been boosting its potency by adding fentanyl, which is 30 to 50 times more potent than heroin. Traffickers have also increased their production of methamphetamine and manufacture of cocaine. And US availability of new psychoactive substances—so-called “designer drugs”—is increasing, with scientists identifying more than 500 unique substances.

Human trafficking is estimated to produce tens of billions of dollars annually for these organized crime groups and for terrorist and armed groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the Lord’s Resistance Army, and Boko Haram. It is a problem likely to worsen given the current global migration crises. Of the sixty million refugees and internally displaced persons—a post-World War II record—many will likely undertake risky migration ventures and fall prey to sex trafficking, forced labor, and debt bondage.



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TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

Transnational organized crime groups are also increasingly engaged in wildlife and human trafficking. Increased demand for ivory and rhino horn in East Asia, for example, has triggered unprecedented increases in poaching in Sub-Saharan Africa.



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ECONOMICS AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Global economic growth will remain subdued. Last year, advanced economies as a group enjoyed their strongest GDP growth since 2010. Developing economies, however, saw the first net capital outflows since the late 1980s, and their GDP growth was the lowest since 2009. While the IMF has forecasted a slight growth upturn in 2016, there are many potential shocks—including a steeper-than-expected slowdown in China’s economy or renewed uncertainty about Greece’s economy—that could prolong the downward trend.

Weak energy and commodity prices have taken an economic toll on many countries. Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil, for example, experienced negative growth and domestic inflation. Similarly, in Africa, declining oil revenues and past mismanagement have contributed to Angolan and Nigerian fiscal problems, currency strains, and deteriorating external balances. Persian Gulf exporters have also seen a sharp increase in budget deficits.

These weak energy prices could set the stage for shortages in coming years when demand recovers: declining energy prices and substantial increases in North American production have



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ECONOMICS AND NATURAL RESOURCES

discouraged initiatives to develop new resources and expand existing projects. These projects typically take years to complete.

Increased economic opportunities are seen in the Arctic in the longer term, as polar ice recedes and natural resource extraction technology improves. This will raise Arctic Nations’ concern about safety and the environment, and increase Arctic and non-Arctic nations’ demand for access to sea routes and resources.



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HUMAN SECURITY

The historic increase in global displacement is threatening human security. Violent extremists are operationally active in about 40 countries. Seven countries are experiencing a collapse of central government authority, and 14 others face regime-threatening, or violent, instability, or both. Another 59 countries face a significant risk of instability through 2016. These factors have contributed to elevated risks of atrocities and the estimated 60 million displaced people worldwide. Europe will continue to face record levels of arriving refugees and other migrants in 2016, but migration and displacement will also be an issue within Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The international community—including host and transit countries—will continue to struggle to respond to this crisis.

Infectious diseases and vulnerabilities in the global supply chain for medical countermeasures will continue to pose threats. For example, the Zika virus, first detected in the Western Hemisphere in 2014, has reached the US and will likely cause up to four million cases in the Americas alone; it is likely to spread to virtually every country in the hemisphere.



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HUMAN SECURITY

The international community remains ill prepared to collectively coordinate and respond to such disease threats.

Environmental issues are also becoming a more common source for stress within and between states. Extreme weather, climate change, environmental degradation, rising demand for food and water, harmful policy responses, and inadequate critical infrastructure will probably exacerbate—and potentially spark—political instability, adverse health conditions, and humanitarian crises in 2016.



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EAST ASIA

China will continue to further an active foreign policy and increase its global presence. Regional tension will also continue as China pursues construction at its expanded outposts in the South China Sea. Internally, China’s leaders are pursuing an ambitious agenda of reforms—military, economic, and legal—meant to bolster the economy, improve efficiency and accountability, and strengthen the control of the Communist Party. The scope and scale of this reform agenda—coupled with an ongoing anti-corruption campaign—might increase internal friction within the Party. And even though China’s leaders have declared slower economic growth to be the “new normal,” they will face pressure to stabilize growth at levels that still support strong job creation.

In Southeast Asia, democracy in many nations will remain fragile, challenged by the corruption and cronyism that run rampant in the region. Elites retain a significant level of control and often shape governance reforms to benefit themselves rather than to promote democratic values. The rising threat of ISIL might provide some governments with a new rationale to not only address the terrorist threat, but also curb opposition movements.



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EAST ASIA

In North Korea, Kim Jong Un has used purges, executions, and leadership shuffles to further solidify his position as the unitary leader. He has focused on advancing North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and trying to develop its troubled economy, while maintaining the tenets of a command economy. He continues to challenge the international community with provocative and threatening behavior in pursuit of his goals, seen most recently in the North’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016.



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RUSSIA AND EURASIA

As the Russian economy—which entered into recession in 2015—continues to shrink, the Kremlin will remain focused on an assertive foreign policy. The tenets of its foreign policy—greater regional integration (and frustration of neighbors’ attempts to integrate into Western institutions), promotion of Russia’s Great Power status, and military modernization—will continue to be on display in 2016. And while President Vladimir Putin – the first leader since Stalin to expand Russia’s territory – has sustained popular approval at or near record highs, the Kremlin’s fears of mass demonstrations will continue to drive repressive tactics. These fears, and the Kremlin’s work to contain them, will be especially acute before the September 2016 Duma election.

This year will also be a challenging one for other countries in the region. While Ukraine has made some progress in its reform efforts and moves to bolster ties with Western institutions, progress on resolving the conflict in Eastern Ukraine will be slow and difficult in 2016. Belarus will continue its geopolitical balancing act, attempting to curry favor with the West without antagonizing Russia. In Moldova, unrest will continue in the face of popular discontent over government



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RUSSIA AND EURASIA

corruption and misrule. In Georgia, economic challenges will become a political vulnerability for the government before the 2016 elections, and Moscow will increase pressure on Tbilisi to abandon closer EU and NATO ties. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, tensions over the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh remained high in 2015, and Baku’s sustained military buildup coupled with declining economic conditions in Azerbaijan increase the risk that the conflict will escalate in 2016. And while Central Asian states remain concerned about the rising threat of extremism, the greater worries are likely to come in the form of economic challenges from official mismanagement, low commodity prices, declining trade and remittances, anti-ethnic tensions and political repression.



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EUROPE

Europe faces challenges both within and without. European governments will face continued political, economic, and security challenges coming from mass migration to Europe, terrorist threats, a more assertive Russia, and a slow economic recovery. Differences among national leaders on how best to confront these challenges are eroding support for deeper EU integration and will bolster backing for populist leaders who favor national prerogatives over EU-wide strategies.

In the Balkans, ethnic nationalism and weak institutions remain enduring threats to stability. Twenty years after the end of the Bosnian War and the signing of the Dayton Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina—one of the poorest counties in Europe—remains culturally and administratively divided, weighted down by a barely functional and inefficient bureaucracy. Kosovo remains calm but fragile. In Macedonia, relations between the ethnic majority Macedonians and the minority Albanians still remain tense. Social tensions in the region could get worse if the Western Balkans becomes an unwilling host to significant migrant populations.



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EUROPE

Turkey—while a partner in countering ISIL and minimizing foreign fighter flows—will continue to see the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as its number one security threat. Turkey is also concerned about Russia’s involvement in the region in support of Bashar al-Assad, the removal of whom Turkey sees as essential to any Syrian peace settlement. Growing Turkish-Russian tensions since Turkey’s shootdown of a Russian jet in November 2015 raise the risk of miscalculation and escalation. And the refugee flow is putting a significant strain on Turkey’s economy, creating infrastructure and social strains.



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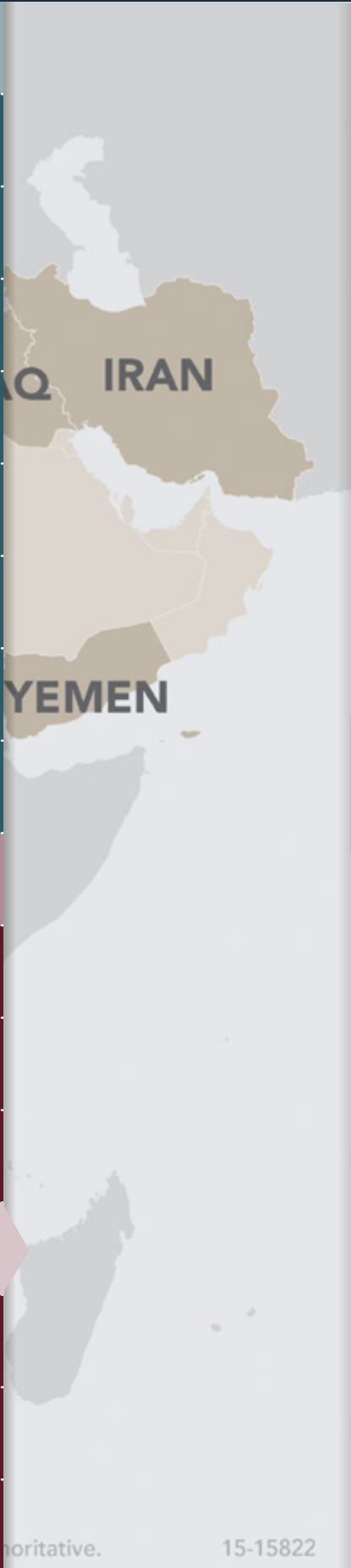
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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

There are more cross-border military operations underway in the mid-East region than at any time since the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. In Iraq, anti-ISIL forces will continue to make incremental battlefield gains, and ISIL will continue to face challenges governing areas it controls as airstrikes put pressure on the group's finances.

In Syria, foreign support will continue to allow Damascus to make gains against the opposition. As the conflict continues, Syria will further bleed population: nearly half of Syria's preconflict population are now classified either as refugees or internally displaced persons.

In Libya, despite the December agreement to form a new "Government of National Accord," establishing authority and security across the country will be difficult, with hundreds of militia groups operating throughout the country.

In Yemen, the conflict between the Saudi-led coalition and the Huthi-aligned forces will remain in a strategic stalemate. The conflict has been exploited by AQAP and ISIL's affiliates in Yemen to gain new recruits and allies, and expand their territorial control.



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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

The Islamic Republic of Iran continues its support to regional terrorist and militants groups and the Asad regime, as well as its development of advanced military capabilities. Iran’s military and security services are keen to demonstrate that their regional power ambitions have not been altered by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

In Lebanon, the influx of more than 1 million Sunni Syrian refugees will continue to have negative consequences on almost all aspects of life, from rising sectarianism to major strains on infrastructure and public services.

Egypt faces a persistent threat of terrorist and militant activity. ISIL’s branch in Sinai, which claimed responsibility for the downing of a Russian aircraft in October 2015, has conducted dozens of lethal attacks on military and security personnel.

Since the Arab Spring, Tunisia has overcome political divisions to reach consensus on key issues, yet still faces challenges in consolidating its democratic transition. It now confronts a threat from terrorist groups emanating from Libya, as well as groups within its borders.



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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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SOUTH ASIA

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SOUTH ASIA

The Afghan Government will continue to face persistent challenges to political stability—challenges both of its own making and those exacerbated by the Taliban. This year, the National Unity Government will confront long-simmering issues like the implementation of election reforms, long-delayed parliamentary elections, and a potential change by a Loya Jirga that might fundamentally alter Afghanistan’s constitutional order. But Afghanistan will not be able to effectively address some of its biggest issues—namely, its dire economic situation or dependence on foreign aid—until it first contains the insurgency. This alone will present a significant challenge, as fighting in 2016 will be more intense than 2015, and since the Taliban—after some early opposition—has coalesced around its new Senior Leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansur.

Relations between India and Pakistan will remain tense despite resumption of a bilateral dialogue in December. Following a terrorist attack in early January on India’s Pathankot Air Force base—which New Delhi blames on a Pakistani-based group—India’s engagement with Pakistan will hinge on Islamabad’s willingness to take action against those in Pakistan linked to the attack.



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SOUTH ASIA

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It will continue to face persistent instability—challenges both of its own exacerbated by the Taliban. This year, the government will confront long-simmering issues of election reforms, long-delayed constitutional amendments, and a potential change by a Loya Jirga to alter Afghanistan’s constitutional framework. The government will not be able to effectively address these issues—namely, its dire economic situation—until it first contains the Taliban. This presents a significant challenge, as the situation is more intense than 2015, and since the Taliban’s opposition—has coalesced around Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansur. Afghanistan and Pakistan will remain tense until bilateral dialogue in December. The Taliban’s attack in early January on India’s consulate—which New Delhi blames on a Pakistani drone—India’s engagement with Pakistan will be a test of its willingness to take action against those responsible for the attack.

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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the prospect of delayed elections originally scheduled for 2016 increase the risk of violence. Violence might also break out in the Republic of Congo, where an October 2015 constitutional referendum paved the way for the long-serving president to run for reelection in 2016. Both governments have previously resorted to heavy-handed tactics to stifle opposition and prevent election-related protests.

In Burundi, violence related to the President Pierre Nkurunziza’s controversial reelection in July 2015 will continue as a simmering crisis.

In the Central African Republic, the risk of continued ethno-religious clashes between Christians and Muslims remains high despite the presence of peacekeeping forces, who are themselves increasingly targets of violence.

In Somalia, the Somali Federal Government’s authority will remain largely confined to the capital, and Mogadishu will continue to rely on the African Union Mission in Somalia as a security guarantor against al-Shabaab as it prepares for elections in 2016.



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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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AFRICA

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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Western Hemisphere



SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

In South Sudan, implementation of the peace agreement between Juba and opposition elements will be slow as spoilers from both sides seek to stall progress. Localized fighting will continue and probably spread to previously unaffected areas.

In Sudan, President Omar al-Bashir consolidated power following his reelection in April 2015, but the regime will continue attempts at a national dialogue. This, though, will not placate a divided political opposition. Divisions among armed opponents will inhibit their ability to make significant gains against Khartoum.

In Nigeria, the government will confront a wide range of deeply-rooted, complex challenges. These include reviving Africa’s largest economy, diversifying sources of government revenue beyond oil, reining in corruption, addressing mounting state debts, reforming redundant parastatal organizations, and developing the power, agriculture, and transportation sectors. Nigeria will also face internal threats from Boko Haram, which will continue its terror campaign within Nigeria and in neighboring Cameroon, Niger, and Chad.



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AFRICA

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WESTERN HEMISPHERE



WESTERN HEMISPHERE

In Central America, weak institutions, divided legislatures, low levels of tax collection, and high debts will constrain efforts to improve rule of law, tackle corruption, and alleviate poverty. Homicide rates in the region remain among the highest in the world, and spiked in El Salvador to levels not seen since the country’s civil war more than two decades ago. These endemic challenges, in addition to strong family ties, will sustain high rates of migration to the United States in 2016.

In Cuba, leaders will remain focused on preserving political control as they prepare for a probable presidential transition in 2018. Economic reforms to reduce the state role in the economy and promote private economic activity will continue at a slow pace, in part because senior leaders fear that rapid changes will provoke popular unrest.

In Venezuela, the opposition won a majority in the December 2015 national assembly election. This sets the stage for a political showdown in 2016 between the legislative and executive branches, as a likely item on the opposition’s agenda is to pursue a presidential recall referendum. Caracas will also face



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WESTERN HEMISPHERE



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HERE

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WESTERN HEMISPHERE



WESTERN HEMISPHERE

fiscal pressures as it seeks to avoid a default on its sovereign debt in 2016. The economy is already suffering from a severe recession that the World Bank projects will persist until 2018.

In Brazil, the corruption investigation at the state-controlled Petrobras oil company will continue through 2016. Many Petrobras officials, construction firm executives, and politicians have already been jailed since the probe was launched in 2014. Brazil lost its investment-grade rating in December 2015 after the second credit agency in three months downgraded its debt to junk status. Further damaging revelations from the probe might prolong political gridlock in Brazil.



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WESTERN HEMISPHERE



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